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## 硕 士 学 位 论 文

### **The Application of Conceptual Metaphor Theory in English Teaching and Learning**

概念隐喻理论在英语教学中的应用

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## Synopsis

Comparatively speaking, Conceptual Metaphor Theory advanced by Lakoff and Johnson is a systematic and complete theory of metaphor. This theory revolves around the relationship of metaphor, language and cognition. Metaphor is a basic human thinking way or cognitive process and it is pervasive throughout everyday language structuring not only how we talk, but also how we think and act, and most of our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature. The core of Conceptual Metaphor Theory is that metaphor is a cognitive process of understanding one thing in one domain with experience of another thing in another domain. Language is a product of human cognition, and metaphor is a cognition tool. Based on Lakoff and Johnson's theory, the author of this thesis believes it is of great importance and necessity to study the role of metaphor, especially conceptual metaphor, in foreign language teaching and learning.

The author first makes a brief introduction of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, including its formation, its definition of conceptual metaphor and its limitations, then in the subsequent parts discusses the cognitive nature of metaphor, the working mechanism of metaphor, the classification of metaphor, the features and functions of metaphor, and the development of Conceptual Metaphor Theory in the applied field of language teaching: conceptual fluency and metaphoric competence. In view of the limitation of Lakoff's theory on cross-cultural study, and especially its inadequate application in English teaching and learning in China bearing cross-cultural characteristics, the author makes a comparison of conceptual metaphors and their linguistic representations in English and Chinese. Since the close relationship of metaphor, language and cognition has made the similarities and differences between English and Chinese expectable, the author is devoted to making the comparison systematic by following the three types of conceptual metaphors classified by Lakoff:

structural metaphors, ontological metaphors and orientational metaphors, aiming to prove that it is a practical and feasible way to teach English culture through metaphor. Based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the comparison between English and Chinese in terms of conceptual metaphors, the author devises some methods to apply the Conceptual Metaphor Theory to English teaching and learning in three aspects: vocabulary teaching, culture teaching and English reading comprehension teaching. In vocabulary teaching, we can use metaphor to explain the expansion and extension of meanings, to identify idioms conveying similar meanings. In culture teaching, we can either explain cultural points under each language point, or reveal the cultural system of English-speaking peoples by analyzing a conceptual metaphor, its submetaphors and their linguistic representations. In reading comprehension teaching, we can adopt a top-down way to grasp the main idea of an English reading and further acquire knowledge of a certain field, instead of the traditional bottom-up way which centers on isolated language points like words and grammar.

**Key words:** Conceptual Metaphor Theory; metaphor; English teaching and learning

## 摘要

莱考夫和约翰逊所提出的概念隐喻理论是较为完善成熟的隐喻认知理论。该理论围绕着语言、认知、隐喻之间的关系展开，认为隐喻从根本上来讲是人类的认知现象，是一种思维方式；隐喻在日常生活中无所不在，存在于语言中，更存在于人的思维和行动中；我们赖以进行思考和行动的日常概念系统，在本质上也是隐喻的。概念隐喻理论的理论核心是隐喻是人类用其某一领域的经验来说明或理解另一类领域的经验的认知活动；语言是人类认知的结果，隐喻又是人类认知的工具。因此作者认为从认知的角度研究隐喻对语言学习，尤其是外语学习，的作用，是非常有益和必要的，概念隐喻理论为研究隐喻和外语学习的相互作用提供了契合点。

本文首先介绍了概念隐喻理论的发展历史，包括其是如何形成的、其对概念隐喻的定义以及其局限性，然后分节探讨了隐喻的认知本质、运行机制、分类、特征和功能，以及概念隐喻在教学应用中的理论发展：概念流利性和隐喻能力。在随后的章节中，作者针对概念隐喻理论在跨文化比较研究上的不足，尤其是针对中国英语教学的跨文化特点，对中英文中的概念隐喻进行了比较研究。由于隐喻、语言和认知三者之间的关系已经决定了中英文中的概念隐喻及其语言表现必然具有共通之处，语言的文化特性又决定了不同语言中的隐喻具有不同的文化特征，作者着重在比较的系统性上，按照莱考夫划分的三类概念隐喻进行比较，其目的是为了表明基于认知基础之上的共通性决定了在英语教学中应用隐喻在现实中的可行性，而基于不同文化的相异之处又突出了文化教学在英语教学中的重要地位。结合以上的讨论，作者分三块分析了如何通过概念隐喻来提高英语学习。首先在词汇教学中可以利用隐喻来解释词的多义性，让学生通过把握隐喻概念掌握表达近似意义的习语；通过隐喻传授文化，这样既能提高学生的文化能力，也能提高他们的隐喻使用能力；在阅读的教学中，了解隐喻的认知过程可以使读者自上而下地把握话语的中心内容而非把重心放在词汇及语法之上的精读式泛读。本文结论部分指出虽然概念隐喻理论对外语教学具有指导意义和实用价值，但在

实际操作中也有困难，值得专家学者及教师进一步研究实验。

**关键词：**概念隐喻理论；隐喻；英语教学

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## **Chapter One Introduction**

### **1.1 Theoretical Background of the Research**

The notion of introducing Conceptual Metaphor Theory into English teaching and learning is an inspiration resulting from the defining features by Lakoff and Johnson (1980:5), who write that metaphors enable learners “to understand and experience one kind of thing in terms of another”. A metaphor is a bridge to learning, for it links and comprises the known and the unknown, the tangible and the less tangible, the familiar and the new, just as “a bridge enabling passage from one world to another” (Schiff, 1979: 106). The bridging role of metaphor in the present research is to enable Chinese learners to master vocabulary more efficiently, to tell the target culture under linguistic representation, to appreciate an English writing in a top-down approach. This proposal is grounded in Lakoff’s Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Lakoff and Johnson defined metaphor as ‘a cross domain mapping in the conceptual system’. They believe metaphor is pervasive in everyday life and language. It is an important means of understanding the world and developing human languages. Lakoff and Johnson identified three types of conceptual metaphor: structural metaphors, ontological metaphors and orientational metaphors, and thought these metaphors are based on and reflect cognitive system, from which are generated a lot of linguistic representations. It is the belief of the present researcher that such metaphors are conducive to facilitating English teaching and learning.

### **1.2 Purpose of the Research**

English has always been receiving emphasis among Chinese people. However, even after many years of study, the actual speech produced by Chinese English learners usually sounds unnatural, though being perfect in form and communicativeness. The reason can be attributed to the fact that foreign language

learners, though having achieved high verbal fluency in target language, still depends on the thinking mode of mother tongue only. Based on this fact, some Chinese scholars have introduced Conceptual Metaphor Theory into China, advocating the importance of developing conceptual fluency, i.e. knowing how a language encodes concepts on the basis of metaphorical reasoning, and metaphoric competence, i.e. the ability to identify a metaphor, to understand metaphor, and to appreciate metaphorical expressions. It is the belief of the author that conceptual metaphors are conducive to facilitating English learners' learning. This research, by taking a cognitive view towards metaphor, aims to introduce Conceptual Metaphor Theory as a new teaching approach to improve the current English teaching in China. It is subscribed to the view that metaphor is a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system, through which the world is partially conceptualized. Under the prevalent use of linguistic metaphors, there is a systematic organization of conceptual metaphors operating coherently in our cognition and language.

### **1.3 Significance of the Research**

The present research starts with a systematic and critical introduction of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, followed by a cross-cultural comparison between English and Chinese, applies metaphor as a cognitive approach to learn English vocabulary including polysemy and idiom, English culture and English reading. While the practical situation in China is that either metaphor and the related studies are not given prominence to by teachers and learners, or there has been little concern among them about the cognitive nature of metaphor. Few even notice the importance of developing conceptual fluency and metaphoric competence in teaching and learning isolated language points. Teaching through metaphor is virtually an uncultivated land. The present research may bridge the gap between the theoretical study of metaphor in cognitive linguistics and their application in applied linguistics. More importantly, the research may offer a new perspective of English teaching and learning and provide one

choice for teachers to adopt more active and efficient instruction and for learners to learn more by deep approach than by surface approach. The research is also conducive to the shift from teacher-centered to more learn-centered, and therefore, may make English learners more autonomous, and make English teachers reflect on their teaching and take some actions in their further professional development.

## **1.4 Organization of this thesis**

This thesis consists of five chapters.

Chapter One is the introduction chapter, in which the author briefly introduces the theoretical background of the research, the purpose for doing this research, the significance of the research and the organization of this thesis.

Chapter Two is a theoretical overview of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, including its development, the cognitive nature of metaphor, the working mechanism of metaphor, and the features and functions of metaphor. The author specially introduces a theoretical development based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory – conceptual fluency and metaphoric competence and connects them with English teaching and learning.

As an answer to one of the limitations of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the importance of culture in foreign language teaching, the author compares conceptual metaphors in English and Chinese in Chapter Three from structural metaphors, ontological metaphors and orientational metaphors. The results are in accordance with the expectation that there are similarities and differences between metaphors in English and Chinese since metaphor is cognitive by nature.

Chapter Four is the main body of the thesis, in which the author discusses the application of Conceptual Metaphor Theory in vocabulary teaching, culture teaching, and English reading comprehension teaching.

The last chapter draws out the conclusion based on the above study. Finally, both the limitations of this paper and suggestions for future researches are also pointed out.

## Chapter Two An Overview of Conceptual Metaphor Theory

*The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.*

(Lakoff and Johnson, 1980:5)

Over the years, more and more western scholars have focused their attention on metaphor from the new perspective – cognition and thinking. The early 1980s witnessed the real beginning of cognitive metaphor study with the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's influential book *Metaphors We Live by*, in which the well-known conceptual metaphor theory was presented and elaborated. This theory elaborates on how human conceptual system is defined and metaphorically structured. In view of the virtual importance of conceptual metaphor, or metaphorical concept, the author will discuss in the subsequent parts the development of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the nature of metaphor, the working mechanism of metaphor, the features and functions of metaphor, the classification of metaphor, and conceptual fluency and metaphoric competence – the development of the theory in applied field.

### 2.1 The Development of Conceptual Metaphor Theory

The earliest study on metaphor can be traced back to Aristotle who enabled metaphor to obtain its positive value and who is thought to undervalue metaphor as no more than an ornament to language. He stated that “metaphors are pleasing words that make us learn something” and that “a command of metaphor is the mark of genius” (Cameron & Low, 2001:72). In *Poetics*, Aristotle (1987: 27) defined metaphor as “the transference of an alien term: transference from genus to species, from species to genus, from species to species, or by analogy...” Although constrained from further discovery of the genuine nature of metaphor, Aristotle's definition dominated the mainstream of metaphor study for a long time. It was not challenged until the 1930s

with the publication of *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Richards, I. A., the writer of the book, proposed interaction theory. Richards was the first that studied the cognitive function of metaphor. He emphasized that “thought is metaphorical” (Richards, 1965: 94). The role of metaphor began to shift from a matter of figurative device to a matter of language and a matter of ideas and thoughts.

The early 1980s witnessed the real beginning of cognitive metaphor study with the publication of Lakoff and Johnson’s book *Metaphors We Live by*. In this epoch-making work, Lakoff and Johnson indicated that metaphor is deeply embedded in our language, culture, and the way we think, and hence it affects how we experience and interact with the world and other people. Metaphors are primarily regarded as a conceptual construction and central to the development of human thought. The greater the degree of abstraction is, the more layers of metaphors are required to express it. But people tend to ignore these metaphors because they have been so popularly used everyday that they even become conventionalized into the necessity of our language and thought.

In 1987, Mark Johnson published the book *The Body in the Mind: the Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*, in which he illustrated that image schema and metaphorical structure, as the two cognition structures for language use and understanding, are basic and important ways for people to have novel imagination and new experience. Also, in the book *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* published in 1990, Lakoff showed that the way we categorize things in language is more often radial and metaphorical than hierarchical.

In 1993, Lakoff further developed Conceptual Metaphor Theory in his paper *The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor*, in which two types of basic conceptual metaphors – generic-level metaphors and specific-level metaphors – are distinguished. It posed great challenges to the views of traditional linguistics.

In 1999, Lakoff and Johnson jointly published another famous book entitled *Philosophy in the Flesh: the Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, in



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